Dreaming of Heroic Days

Paintings by Caroline McNairn

presented by Beyond Borders Scotland

Summerhall, 1 Summerhall
Edinburgh, EH9 1PL

1 August - 26 September 2014

Caroline McNairn (1955- -2010)

Biography

1955	Born in Selkirk, Scotland
1972-78	Studied Fine Art at Edinburgh University.
	The artists lives and works in Edinburgh.

Solo Exhibtions

1981	Calton Studios, Edinburgh.
1981, 84, 87	369 Gallery, Edinburgh.
1986	Trevelyan College, University of Durham.
1987	Le Cadre Gallery, Hong Kong.
1989	'Forum', Hamburg.
1990	369 Gallery, Edinburgh.
1990	Kay Garvie, Chicago.
1992	Guelman Gallery's, Moscow.
1992	369 Gallery, Edinburgh.
1994	369 Gallery, Edinburgh.
1997	Bourne Fine Art, Edinburgh.
2011	Traquair House, Innerleithen.
2011	Bourne Fine Art, Edinburgh.

Selected Group Exhibitions

1977	Two-person show, Saltire Society Gallery, Edinburgh.
1981	"Edinburgh Behind the Façade", Scottish Arts Council Travelling Exhibition.
1982	Three-person show, Edinburgh Festival Club.
1984	The Caledonian Club, London. "Scottish Expressionism", Warwick Arts Trust, London. "The New Wave", 369 Gallery Festival Exhibition "What Are Young Scottish Artists Doing?" 369 Gallery Travelling Exhibition.
1984-85	"Young Scottish Contemporaries" Travelling Exhibition. "Contemporary Scottish Landscape". Edinburgh City Art Centre.
1985-89	Chicago International Art Exposition.
1985	"Scottish Painting", Linda Durham Gallery, Santa Fe. "Five Scottish Artists", Leinster Fine Art, London.
1986	Avenue B Gallery, New York. "Artists At Work", Edinburgh International Festival. Le Cadre Gallery, Hong Kong. Los Angeles Contemporary Art Fair. "Art Branches Out", SAC Travelling Gallery Exhibition.
1987	Two-person show, Charterhouse Club, London. "A Tradition In Art", Chambers Institute, Peebles. "Continuing the Tradition", 369 Gallery, Edinburgh and Warwick Arts Trust, London.
1987-88	"Contemporary Scottish Art", touring Highland Region.
1988	Three-person show, Arts in General, New York. 369 Gallery Tenth Anniversary Exhibition.
1988-89	"Colour in Scottish Painting", Edinburgh City Art Centre.
1989	"Contemporary Scottish Painting", Palace of Youth, Moscow. "Coldhouse Soo", Soo Terminal, Chicago.
1989-90	"Scottish Art Since 1990", Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh and Barbican Gallery, London.
1990	"New Scottish Colourists", 369 Gallery, Edinburgh. "Painting the Forth Bridge", 369 Gallery, Edinburgh and touring. "Edinburgh Printmakers", Vanessa Devereux Gallery, London. "New Figuration", Odessa, U.S.S.R.
1991	"Edinburgh Moscow", Georgian Cultural Institute, Moscow. "ART MIF", Moscow Art Fair.
1999	"Tribute to Pushkin", Russian Embassy, London.

Collections

Derby Art Gallery
Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank
James Capel & Co.
Dundee Art Gallery
Cooper and Lybrand Ltd.
L. & M. Moneybrokers Ltd.
Scottish Arts Council
The Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow
Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art
Russian Museum of Contemporary Tsaritsyno

Caroline McNairn

Caroline McNairn was born to be a painter like her father, grandfather and great-great grandfather before her. Her family were from Hawick in the Scottish Borders where her grandfather had been proprietor of a local newspaper and an accomplished amateur painter much influenced by the writings of Vincent Van Gogh. Anne Redpath, William Gilles and William Johnstone were family friends and Caroline's beloved father John, who was born in 1910 and lived for almost a century, studied at Edinburgh College of Art in the 1920's and then in the early 30's in Paris under Othon Friesz, who was a friend and pupil of Cezanne; thus, Caroline was only two steps away from the father of modern art and it is not surprising that the heroic period of early 20th century art had such a marked influence on her.

I first met her in 1972 when we were both studying Fine Art at Edinburgh University and Edinburgh College of Art, and we were comrades in artistic arms from then on. In 1978 I founded the 369 Gallery in Edinburgh to promote young Scottish artists and in the 1980s Caroline was one of the first of a new generation of Scottish figurative painters to exhibit with the gallery in New York and Chicago. In 1986 she had a critically acclaimed show at the cutting edge Avenue B Gallery in Manhattan where her work was admired by Keith Haring and Jean Michele Basquiat, followed by a string of successful shows in Hong Kong, Los Angeles, Santa Fe, Chicago and Düsseldorf. "In the Field" and "Round the Corner " shown here were two of a group of large pictures exhibited in 1989 at the Art In General Gallery, New York.

In 1989-90 Caroline spent a year painting in Russia and the Ukraine, which the culmination of an historic cultural exchange between Scotland and the former Soviet Union organised by the 369 Gallery which had mounted one of the first exhibitions in the West of Russian contemporary art for the 1987 Edinburgh Festival. In return, in 1989, I was invited to curate an exhibition of young Scottish painters in Moscow including McNairn. Three of the paintings illustrated here -"The Stand", "Looking Outside" and "Crossing the Line"- were included in that ground breaking show. "The Stand", which was purchased by the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow, was the first painting by a Western artist to be acquired by a Soviet Gallery since the Russian Revolution and hung alongside her heroes Cezanne, Gauguin and Matisse.

Caroline and I soon realised that several of the most impressive young Moscow painters were in fact Ukrainians whose frequent train journeys between Moscow and Kiev earned them the nickname the "Kievsky Station Group". McNairn became an honorary member and exhibited with them in Moscow, Kiev and Odessa, and in 1993 the 369 Gallery presented a major exhibition of these young Ukrainian artists "Angels Over the Ukraine" at the Edinburgh International Festival. This cultural intercourse profoundly affected McNairn's painting and she described her stay in Moscow as 'a love affair' with the city. The resulting paintings, several of which are exhibited here, such as "Moscow\Kiev" and "Dynamo," are the equivalent of love poems.

In 1993 Caroline married the writer and sculptor Hugh Collins in Edinburgh's Mansfield Traquair Church where "Angels Over the Ukraine" was being exhibited. Hugh and Caroline had met several years earlier at the 369 Gallery when he was on day release from Barlinnie Prison where he was coming to the end of a 16-year sentence for murder. From the beginning she had total confidence in him both artistically and spiritually and he believes that his rehabilitation as an artist and author was entirely due to her. They lived in Edinburgh for several years but later left the city to convert a disused Co-op Store in the village of Gorebridge just outside Edinburgh into a Gallery and Art-Centre for disadvantaged children where Hugh taught sculpture and Caroline painting - she was a natural teacher and her pupils loved her - but she still had the time and space to produce some monumental canvases such as "On the Edge", exhibited here, which synthesise her love of both landscape and figuration.

In 2005 the couple moved to a secluded cottage in the Scottish Borders to be near to Caroline's infirm parents. Though this burden of care took up a great deal of her time, she was still able to paint albeit on a smaller scale and the luminous group of watercolour landscapes from the last year of her life which conclude this exhibition prove her talent was undiminished to the end. These were painted during a residency on the Traquair Estate and perfectly encapsulate her love of the Borders. Caroline died in 2010 at the age of 55 of late diagnosed cervical cancer, and her untimely death at the height of her abilities is a sore loss to her husband and friends and a blow to Scottish Art.

Andrew Brown

In the Making 1987
Oil on Canvas 183x183
Collection of City Art Centre Edinburgh

Looking Outside 1987
Oil on Canvas 183x183
Collection of National Galleries of Scotland

The Stand 1987
Oil on Canvas 183x183
Collection of the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts

One Foot in Eden: A Personal Memoir

One heavily scuffed and splitting, dusty pink ballet pump, ankle ribbons flailing midway down the staircase, kicked off by a person recently in a hurry to tear up to the bath, a mysterious person of unstoppable force who clearly knew how to have fun, now to be heard giggling up there abstracted into the steam, is my earliest memory of the artist, or at least a recollected early register in my two year old self of her advanced existence. Always ahead of me, and not merely by five years in age, she was often just out of sight, in the vanguard, and on her way to fresh pleasures. Art and Fun and Peace were her beacons. And all my life since then Caroline McNairn, in her person and in her painting, has blazed forth with all three. Her greatest imprimatur was to say of another that they lived for Art. They served Art. Like Puccini's Tosca, Vissi d'arte, vissi d' amore! I lived for art, I lived for love! But she was equally and actively an advocate of Fun and Peace, states of being deeply interconnected with Art, itself a lived, embodied experience, not merely some remote unattainable ideal. And, all shook up, in her frequently animated talk, she was as likely to invoke Elvis as Tosca, or the Marx Brothers as Eisenstein. Finding herself 'One foot in Eden' with Edwin Muir (whose poetry titled many of her paintings), Caroline well understood 'Strange blessings never in Paradise/ Fall from these beclouded skies.'

Certainly in my first ten or so years I knew her mostly as the strange and absent patron of my own wardrobe. For I grew up from birth wearing Caroline's dresses. Our mothers, Stella and Joy, were fantastic dressmakers and they would pass on clothes (made from Borders yarns) between Ca, myself, and Julia, her younger sister, born two years after me. Years later I shared rented flats in Edinburgh at different times with Caroline and with Julia, herself an artist too. The sharing of clothes continued. It was so much the mode at our flat in Huntly Street in the early 1980s that Stella called us 'the girls of slender means' after Muriel Spark's story. In the intervening period, when she was first away in Edinburgh plunging into art at the art college and art history at the university and life in the city, news of Ca's achievements in paint and her adventures away from home would occasionally reach me. But it was not until I moved to Edinburgh in 1978, when I started at university myself just as she had finished, that I got to know this elusive childhood legend in person. Our friendship began I suspect in a mutually felt obligation to our parents' long-standing friendship, and a mutual curiosity arising from that accidental family connection, which originated in the Borders in the late 1950s when Caroline's father John McNairn, head of art at Selkirk high school, appointed my father, Robert Goldman, to his first brief teaching post. My parents, both painters, stayed long enough to find in John and Stella lifelong kindred spirits with similarly 'modern' tastes. By 1961, the year after I was born, our family moved east to Northumberland, and then south to Yorkshire. Our parents occasionally exhibited work together in modest local venues on both sides of the border in the 1960s and 1970s, and these shows attracted modest press attention and precious few sales. Like Ca and Julia, I grew up attending such events more or less as an extension of family life; and we grew up listening to and—when we could manage to get our voices heard—participating in many powerful and heated debates on contemporary politics and modern art stoked at the McNairn and Goldman kitchen tables. Yet, while the older generation continued, some more successfully than others, to paint and exhibit and argue into their dotage, it was clear by the mid 1980s that the table talk had turned.

Conversation with Caroline in front of her paintings was an education to me of a different order. Her paintings, radically breaking up the picture plane, making unsettling play between vibrant constellations of inner and outer states, urban and pastoral scapes, abstract and figurative forms, draw too on a breath-taking range of archival and art historical sources, as admiring critics have observed, but in such glorious colourist strokes (Matisse-like, perhaps, but distinctively hers). My friend in talk ranged with such ease from Russian icons to pop memorabilia, from the Walter Scott monument and other recognisable Edinburgh landmarks to Soviet souvenirs or the wall paintings of ancient Egyptian tombs, all referenced or inspirations in her art, along with a panoply of literary plunder—from Gertrude Stein, Ivan Turgenev, Wallace Stevens, for example, as well as from the deeply cherished Edwin Muir. Yet the paintings are breath-taking visual pleasures without any 'reading off' of such referencing as might become evident on contemplation.

Art and Fun and Peace combined in so many formative moments for me, presided over by Caroline. Not least was our participation in the mass embracing of the base at Greenham Common, in the bitter Cold War winter of 1982. Hilarious squabbles over the feminist import of what we should wear (and where best to conceal the bottle of Martini she rightly insisted on taking) preceded a long night on a freezing coach hurtling south, and a long and freezing but utterly joyous and exhilarating day at the base: thousands of us, women encircling weapons of mass destruction in the active embrace of Peace, weaving dissenting mementoes into the wire fence. Perhaps the security forces have archived my slogan daubed silk dressing gown along with the clutch of luminous drawings Caroline tied there on that momentous feminist day.

The pleasures of peaceful dissent were much tested in the Thatcher years when a woman in such an unprecedented position of power seemed cruelly bent on serving patriarchy and misogyny, and gender and class war, as well as vicious American foreign policy. My skies were brightened one summer day in 1987 when Caroline by chance swept me off to Edinburgh's Fruitmarket Gallery to see the 'goddess' works of the American artist, Nancy Spero and to hear the critic and mythographer Marina Warner give a lecture on these transformational images of liberated classical caryatid figures bounding free from their patriarchal fixtures as the architectural conceits upholding the very edifices of the empire enslaving them. It was a timely moment of great intellectual insight for me, a fledgling academic recently embarked on my PhD research into feminist aesthetics in the work of the writer Virginia Woolf and her sister, the painter Vanessa Bell.

Some twenty years later, it was my great pleasure to introduce Marina Warner as the plenary keynote for 'Contradictory Woolf', the international Virginia Woolf conference we held at the University of Glasgow in June 2011. And of course I commissioned Caroline to design the 'Contradictory Woolf' conference logo and poster. The stunning monochrome image she made for me in the spring of 2010 is also on the cover of the published conference proceedings. Her pet dog, Blackie, a border collie, was Ca's source for the dog in that image, who in profile appears to be whispering 'undeniable, everlasting, contradictory things' into the ear of Virginia Woolf, in turn apparently recognizing her own words as she gazes out from beneath a stylized starry icon. Her preliminary sketches of Woolf have since appeared on other Woolf publications. During the gestation of this design, I made many visits to the farm cottage in the Borders that Ca in latter years shared with her husband, Hugh Collins, fellow artist and writer. This beautiful spot was one where I know Ca found what Edwin Muir calls, in a poem she loved, 'The Sufficient Place', a place of Art and Fun and Peace in no small measure, albeit at a time when she was occupied in supporting her increasingly frail elderly parents. In our many consultations over her Woolf image, she acknowledged a certain nod in her art to Russian iconography. But I see Spero too. And looking back now at the emergence in her paintings in the late 1980s of standing and mobilizing human figures of indeterminate gender, becoming more and more somatically labile, mutably intermixing in the heady and equally fluctuating pastoral and urban contexts in the works that follow from the 1990s into the new millennium, I wonder if these too owe something perhaps to Spero. Alas, I can now no longer drive to that last sufficient place of hers in order to ask my friend directly.

Many decades after my glimpse of the abandoned ballet slipper, I invited its elusive wearer to lead a university postgraduate seminar on the persistence of modernist aesthetics in contemporary art. She brought in several of her own paintings, not just standard slides, to illustrate her talk, along with sundry cherished objects, including a lovingly stitched craft kit portrait of Elvis in silhouette she had found in a charity shop, and a tourist souvenir bust of Lenin she had brought back from her time in Soviet Russia. She supplemented these with a rapid slide tour of portraiture ranging from ancient to modern times, sacred and secular, flashing up Russian icons and Matisses in amongst her own works. The paintings she brought were a series of small works of heads and abstract shapes, which she encouraged us to arrange and rearrange in different configurations. She talked of her formative years in Edinburgh with Andrew Brown's 369 Gallery, and of time spent in both America and Russia in the 1980s and 1990s, of her shows at the Avenue B Gallery, Manhattan (admired by Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat), and other American galleries in Chicago, Los Angeles and Santa Fe, and of her exhibitions with the notorious Kievski Station Group in Moscow and Odessa. Here was a living lesson in the cultural politics of the Cold War and its aftermath. By turns both deeply moving and wildly funny, both intellectually and academically rigorous and wittily, wickedly anecdotal, Caroline spoke with such warmth and penetrating illumination, to young people barely born at the end of that era, of what it was like to struggle for Art and Fun and Peace in Thatcher's Britain, whilst being feted as an artist of true distinction in both America and Russia, yet still often broke and seriously underestimated in her own country, and of the strange blessings that fell to her from those beclouded Cold War skies.

Jane Goldman, 10 June 2014

Something beautiful for Russia

The paintings that Caroline McNairn produced during and after her stay in the Soviet Union possessed continuities with her earlier work, but were also infused with a new spirit of confidence and maturity, a new quality of invention and experimentation, which is evident in the boldness and sophistication with which she used colour, manipulated space, and orchestrated her compositions. She described some of these works as "something beautiful for Russia".

She had spent almost a year immersed in the art world of Moscow, which at this time (1989-1990) was filled with optimism and excitement. It was just before the fall of communism and the end of the Cold War. The old USSR was opening up, Mikhail Gorbachev was trying to modernise the country, and the future looked brighter than it had for decades. Avant-garde art of the 1910s and 1920s that had been barely shown before was being brought out of the vaults, reproduced and discussed. Western art was becoming accessible. Soviet artists were no longer forced to experiment behind closed doors, but could work and exhibit freely. It was a wonderful moment for a cultural exchange. Caroline was welcomed with open arms and she was immediately absorbed into the hectic activities of Russian artistic life, exhibiting with groups in Moscow and Odessa, particularly the Kiev Station Group. It is eminently appropriate that in 1989 the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow bought one of her paintings – one of the first paintings by a foreign artist that it had purchased since the Revolution of 1917.

The experience of living and working as a Russian artist in the Soviet Union was evidently an enormous revelation and liberation. Caroline was exposed to the extraordinary art of the icon, the innovative canvases of the Russian avant-garde, especially the abstract paintings of figures like Kazimir Malevich, and to the passionate discussion of aesthetic issues which dominated (and still dominate) Moscow's artistic life. She began to see Western art in general, as well as Scottish art and her own work in particular, in a new way. It both affirmed her identity as a Scottish artist while enriching her ideas and stimulating her creative practice.

Like the historic Russian avant-garde, McNairn embraced the implications of European modernism, the inventions of Cézanne, Matisse, and Picasso, and explored the nature of each pictorial component (the line, plane, colour, volume, space, etc.) and the way in which each operates within the work as a whole. She stretched the potential of painting as a medium to its limits, skilfully manipulating visual tensions and paradoxes. She acknowledged the masters of the past and included references to their works and compositions in her own paintings, while intensively experimenting with pictorial structure and form.

McNairn's paintings emphasise the flat surface of the canvas, but also convey a powerful sensation of space - a space that is fluid and tangible, vibrating with ambiguities, fusing solid and void, interior and exterior, cityscape and rural landscape. In works like In the Making and Looking Outside, the combination of abstract forms, human figures, urban constructions, views of factories, geological formations, plants, a painting and still-life objects appears to blend various spatial experiences over time, suggestive of dreams or memories, both personal and universal. The complexities of the compositions refuse to subscribe to any comprehensive narrative, although they invite the viewer to imaginatively engage with the images and construct a meaning.

The effects of the paintings are enriched by the formal contrasts that McNairn used: abstract planes set against figurative elements, opacity against transparency, bright colour against dark, white against black, small details against more generalised, monumental shapes. Crosses (perhaps deriving from Malevich) are combined with flowing organic forms. Different areas of a single painting often possess completely different visual characteristics. Occasionally, McNairn divided a single painting into compartments, challenging herself and the medium to unify the composition and establish a visual coherence for the whole.

Like icon painters who inscribed the names of the saints depicted, identifying the subject and guiding the viewer, McNairn introduced lettering into certain paintings. These inscriptions comprise a confusing mixture of simple lines as well as features taken from the Cyrillic, Latin and runic alphabets (alluding perhaps to the Viking runes in Scotland). The messages are elusive, adding another level of ambiguity; they imply that there is a possibility of decoding the image, while emphatically resisting all attempts at interpretation. McNairn was perhaps echoing the way in which words and images were used by the Russian Futurists, who had pursued the notion of a universal language of sounds, and Mikhail Larionov who had added obscene phrases and graffiti to his solider paintings of the 1910s.

McNairn's paintings contain figurative elements, but these are treated like abstract entitles. As in early icon painting, the human figures are generalised, often flat and insubstantial, existing in a multi-dimensional space that bears little relationship to everyday reality. Compositionally important, but visually ambiguous, these figures are frequently denoted by mere outlines, achieving an unsteady solidity as their shapes coalesce from a loose layering of different coloured brush strokes and patches of colour, where each mark of paint seems to operate like an esoteric sign with its own distinctive shape, colour and texture. These marks define the figure, yet simultaneously assert their own identity and threaten to destroy the figure's coherence, paralleling the painting approach of Pavel Filonov. In McNairn's works, the balance between figuration and abstraction is held in a fine equilibrium that never disintegrates, although it often looks as if it is about to do so.

In harnessing the new sources of inspiration that she encountered in Russia and responding to the visual stimuli provided by the distinctive qualities of Russian culture, Caroline McNairn enhanced her pictorial vocabulary without diminishing her originality. The result was paintings that possess a unique vision and are imbued with extraordinary vitality, energy and power.

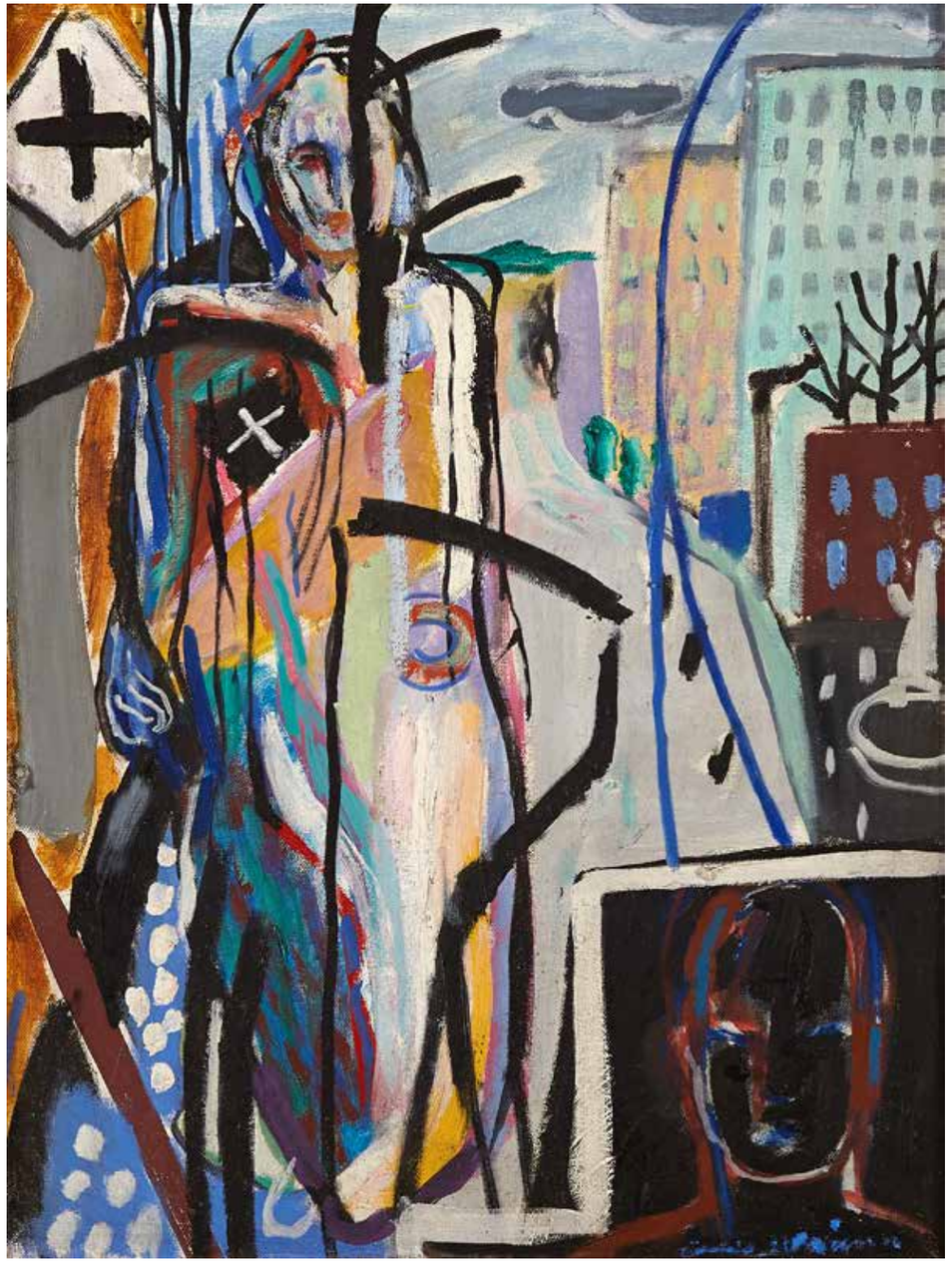
Christina Lodder

Previous Pages: On The Edge 2000
Oil on Canvas 183x330
Private Collection

Others there 1994
Oil on Canvas 48x61
Private Collection

Resting in the field 1988
Oil on Canvas 190x190
Private Collection

Round the corner 1988
Oil on Canvas 190x190
Private Collection



Nostalgia for Modernism

Françoise Sagan said once that the genre of exhibition catalogue texts belongs to the 20th century's treasury of involuntary comic literature. Practically unreadable articles, which combine qualities of eulogy for the artist with an interpretation of his art for "blind" visitors, are transformed into strange manifestations of "art criticism for art criticism's sake." In our case the traditional comicality of the genre is reinforced by the position of the author. He is a foreigner, a person belonging to a different culture who can't understand, probably, the main thing – nuances of artistic life – which he tries to analyse. But his strangeness has one positive side; it gives him the possibility to generalize.

The first time I saw Caroline McNairn's pictures was during the Moscow exhibition of young Scottish painters, organised by 369 Gallery in 1989. Half a year later I visited Edinburgh. From my first day in the city I thought that I was inside one of Caroline McNairn's canvases. The hills of Edinburgh, muffled by the soft, cold light of the December day, the magic of the classical straight streets and numerous circuses of the New Town brought into my mind only one Russian analogy – the City of Peter. And even sympathetic Walter Scott, sitting under the vault of a pompous Gothic Revival arch, looking a little bit like Frankenstein, was transformed by the artist into the dominant symbol of the city. Nomadic Waverly moves from picture to picture. He plays the role of the absolute symbol of Edinburgh, the key to its magic. The "Stone Writer" in McNairn's personal mythology looks like the "Bronze Horseman", the ominous and mysterious monument of Peter the Great, in the cultural tradition of St. Petersburg.

On the other hand, the reproduction of the image of the Scottish Shrine in McNairn's paintings is a reminder of the "waverlyzation" of the tourist's subculture of modern Edinburgh, the city of Walter Scott, haggis, bagpipes, whisky and the other national stereotypes. In some way, the role of the monument is similar to the role of the bagpipe-player, who plays not far from the entrance of Marks and Spencer during the Christmas week. The silhouette of "Stone Writer" in McNairn's canvases is a manifestation of Scottishness, (as words on a whisky bottle label: "produced, blended and bottled in Scotland.").

Opposite: Dynamo, 1992
Oil on Canvas 61x48
Private Collection

But Scott's monument is only a sign, which is equal to other signs of the city: a man, a tree, a building, an inscription. I'm not sure that an old-fashioned definition such as "cityscape" would be useful for the artist's style. The image of the city, generalized and transformed into a sum of universal archetypes, is sometimes determined by the local signs. If, in genre status, nascent landscape was no more than a background, a distant view situated behind the Holy Virgin's shoulders, in the 17th century cityscapes architecture was crushing man, turning him into an ant, whose hysterical movements demonstrated a contrast between the vanity fair of everyday life and the stateliness of ancient temples and ruins. Only in the beginning of the 20th century did a city and a man become equal, (at first on the canvases of the French Impressionists, as a bright, urbanistic optimism, and later, in German Expressionism, which confirmed the horror of a city by the grimness of its residents.) McNairn's art demonstrated this equality too. But the balance has a different character. It is not optimistic, or pessimistic. It shows quietude, which is fraught with emptiness. Faceless people are living among faceless houses, with the blind eyes of windows and trees, which are similar to man, in their loneliness. Only spires, hills and alone, Walter Scott, are the circumstances of place, (not time, because time doesn't exist in these pictures). At first sights these canvases look very classical. But the "renaissance" structure is an illusion. Big figures, which are traditionally situated on the foreground, are more generalized, more empty than details that exist on the second ground. A silhouette of a city on the horizon, which occupied the back of a canvas, is often the most concrete, most recognizable part of the image. This effect of artistic "presbyopia" is presented in McNairn's art as an unconscious parody on the structure of museum pictures.

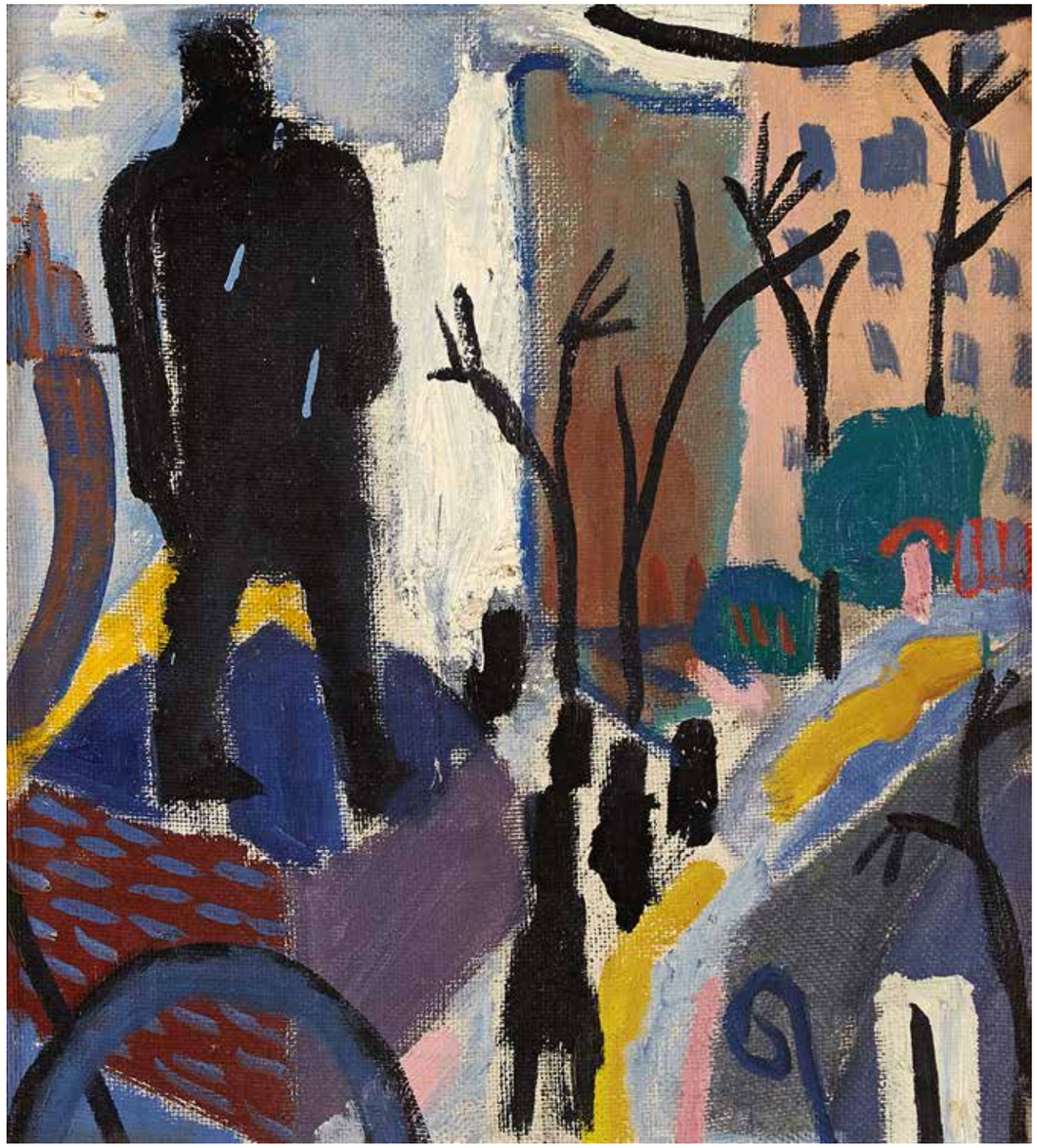
The applicability of the definition "cityscape" to the genre, which was produced by Caroline McNairn, seems strange because it's not only landscape painting. Her canvases are a mixture of interiors and city views, still-lives situated on the foreground and pictures, which, if hung on invisible or visible walls, play a role of "picture inside picture." For me, this double space, this absence of a border between an apartment and a street is not only the artist's invention, but a symbol of

Edinburgh, the city where people never curtain the windows in the evening. As a result of this strange (for a foreigner) custom, I felt, during my night walks, that I was walking not only through the streets, but through the apartments. But if I was observing the theatre of private lives from the street, the figures, painted by the artist, were often watching the play of a city through the transparent walls. The unity of figurative and abstract elements is characteristic of Caroline McNairn. Sometimes, the role of the decorative area is more aggressive and dynamic than the significance of the human image. This border of reality is represented in the motif of an inscription, which can be explained as a transformation of street ads and at the same time reminders of Celtic tombstones. The magic of hieroglyphic signs, the symbols of letters transformed into ornament full of aggressive rhythm, is no more than a shadow of a text which is equal to the shadows of people living in artist's imaginary city.

The colour of McNairn's pictures is cold. Blue and grey, purple and green, pink and strontium fill up her canvases. Red and brown are only for accentuation. But black plays the main role. It organizes the masses of colour as an outline, a border between areas.

Many times critics have noticed the artist's connection with the tradition of the French art of the first decade of the 20th century. Why does Caroline McNairn try to be Matisse with a strong Scottish accent today, in the epoch when the American-made word "Postmodernism" has been turned into a banner? For us, the generation living in the Kingdom of Total Irony, the rebellion of the French "wild beasts" looks like a life in Eden. Their art, in the process of historical metamorphosis, has become part of the museum of human culture. Being cynical, playing at deconstruction, we are longing for "old-fashioned" art with traditional values. Caroline McNairn is looking for harmony in that phase of 20th century art, which is "classical" modernism for the contemporary art historian. She is seeking it in France, the very name of which is a synonym for the beginning of the new painting. For Caroline McNairn art history is a tool for her work, just like brushes and paint. But she is not only looking back for ironical manipulation of the classical tradition. Her nostalgia for "modernism" is a sign of our time, which is dreaming not even about the "lost centre", but about heroic days when the artist still had something to overthrow.

Konstantin Akinsha, July 1990



Opposite: Moscow 1990
Oil on Canvas 38x34
Private Collection

Acknowledgements

Curator: Andrew Brown
Catalogue Design: Claire Corley

Our warmest thanks to:

Contributors & Friends
Dr. Jane Goldman
Professor Christina Lodder
Konstantin Akinsha

Mark Muller Stuart QC
Catherine Muller Stuart at Traquair House
Mark McLeod
Lee Miller
Edinburgh City Art Centre
Geraldine and Robert Mcdowell
Hugh Collins

With special thanks to Beyond Borders Scotland for making
this exhibition possible and to Summerhall for hosting us.

Presented by Beyond Borders Scotland, hosted by Summerhall
and supported by Friends of Caroline McNairn.

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SUMMERHALL


Caroline